

**The House of Hope Presbyterian Church**  
**February 6, 2022**  
**Macalester Sunday/Fifth Sunday after Epiphany**  
**“A Letter to the Church at Summit and Avon”**  
**Rev. Dr. Julia A. Carlson**

Dear House of Hope: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” I am grateful for you and celebrate the grace of God that has been given to us in Christ Jesus. As I echoed Paul to you not long ago, you are not lacking in any spiritual gifts—but I wonder if you trust that.

Last year on Macalester Sunday, we were still watching our services online and we didn’t have that live experience of the bagpipes. We are grateful Kelly and Felicia are here along with the pipes for the first Sunday of our new transition. We’d hoped the choir would be here but it was not yet possible with the virus

Maybe it’s Covid languishing, but I am impressed by our joint founder’s energy, or perhaps it was what they call religious zeal. To have started not one but two congregations in Saint Paul as well as Macalester College is quite a legacy. However, we have, in recent years, found out that Neill was also someone with deep prejudice; our sister college has done its work around this racist past, it was important to their student body to do so. We have not had that conversation yet and it is a difficult conversation to have.

Thousands of years ago the church in Corinth also had many difficult conversations. For them it had to do with newness, for us it has to do with a multiplicity of changes both inside and outside the church. Yes, Neill was a man of his time but that is not the same as stating outright that racism and its systemic forms go against the love God has for the entire human family. Racism is a cancer among us.

After Paul’s greeting to the church in Corinth, he wrote, “I appeal to you sisters and brothers by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement that there be no divisions among you, but that you are united in the same mind in the same purpose. For it has been reported to me . . . that there are quarrels among you, . . . What I mean is that each of you says, I belong to Paul, or I belong to Apollos, or I belong to Cephas, or I belong to Christ. Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”

Some of you were baptized by Dr. West but never in the name of Dr. West. There were surges of music and new instruments and delights in preaching with Didier but we do not belong to Didier. We do not belong to Loving, or Van Dyke or MacDonald. Worship is about the combined messages, the years of faith formation for our continued spiritual growth. We have grown from these long held and deeply felt traditions and we hoped to pass them on.

In this secular age, we have been casting our nets and working through the long night without growing the church. There is an ambiguous grief around that; we feel it more keenly because of transition and pandemic. As many are turning away from organized religion, fishing for people can feel like a hopeless task. We look to the past and sigh. We look to the future and see uncertainty.

Sometimes, my dear, House of Hope, I think, in that sighing and uncertainty, we have mentally turned the pews around, perhaps looking to the past. In my mind’s eye, it looks to me as though we are sitting and watching the Summit Avenue doors, waiting for a crowd of families or a lineup of pilgrims, or just the

right pastor to come and save us. Paul's ministry was similar—after the crucifixion people did not know where to look for hope. He directed them toward the cross, just as our pews actually face the Passion Window. If you can't see it just now, take a look at both the work and sorrow as well as the joys of discipleship. Today, this window is an icon for the faith in which we stand.

Two years ago in 2020, Maude Quinn, a Macalester grad, preached to us about the process she and her friends followed to build a supportive and meaningful community. Now many of us did that through the church, but traditional congregational life is not as appealing for the Millennial cohort.

In a recent conversation with another Millennial, a group of us heard the passionate cry for safe space in which to explore spirituality—to explore theology and a life of faith. The conversation then turned elements that go into creating safe space. First, we were told, it comes through acknowledgment of our past missteps. They need us to be brave enough to hear their concerns, critiques, and perhaps even stories of abuse when it comes to past church experience.

Safe space also means listening and acceptance when beliefs, doubts, and questions are shared. And finally, in her own words, "I hate feeling like a commodity." The marketing world has been focused on their generation since birth – and now as adults, everyone wants their buy in—including organized religion. For many reasons, they are wary of becoming joiners.

That generation gap is clearly on my mind today but there is also this: the where and when of the origin of bagpipes is blurry because they've been around since before Jesus was born. I will never cease to be touched deeply by the pipes and I will pursue every opportunity I have to hear them. The Scots boldly claim that the bagpipes were the sound God used at the beginning of time to create the world! There are gaps between generations but as with bagpipes, there are long and continuous connections. This isn't about giving up what we love but adding to it.

We have room after room in which small communities of safety and trust can gather. Our transparent and (I hope) authentic promise is that every square foot of building and property belongs not to ourselves but to God—we have space and leadership for a great variety of spiritual formation worthy of the 4 or 5 generations among us as well as for neighbors and friends. And perhaps even our sister college. Every year after Macalester Sunday, Kelly and I have breakfast and talk about our hope for new connections between our congregation and hers. What if they are fishing for us? Are you willing to be caught?

Our faith and gifts—held in these bodies of clay—are stronger than even these stones and beams that shelter us. It is as the Body of Christ at Summit and Avon in whom God has placed a mission and a calling. So in terms of fishing for people, we might consider a new system of accounting from Sunday attendance, pledge units, and membership rolls to the number and ways we have shared our miraculous catch, like: Jeremiah Project, Ujamaa Place, and Prior Crossing—ministries not for our gain but an expenditure of love for the greater good. This is what has been known through the history of the church as *oikomenos*—or God's economy. The Beacon clothing drive overflowed the bin and after the sorters finished, clothing went to Beacon and also to Ujamaa Place and Ain Dah Yung. Your nets have been cast wide and in these ways are full to breaking. It is a change from thinking inwardly and about membership to thinking outwardly to relationship, mission, and community. We are part of an ecosystem of care in this city.

Macalester's presence reminds us of our treasured past and at the same time invites us to put our hearts and strength, our interest and investment into their futures as well as the future of our children and grandchildren even if it doesn't follow the same pattern we followed. This building can still be a net for new ministries but, just as Jesus instructed Peter to put out into deeper water, we may also have to let go of the familiar shoreline and take some new soundings. God is out ahead of us preparing a way.

I'm writing today from what is true and what is not true within and between two quotes that popped up this week, the first of which is, "Tradition is peer pressure from dead people." The second is this, "Go big or go home." Over the years and then again just this week members have shared their dream that we take the Portland lot and build underground parking with a concert venue or community center above.

It's because of dreams like this that I don't really believe the first is true; however, in whatever choices we make, if we choose to focus only on our own survival, take no risks, stay on the ground rather than take a leap of faith into our jointly discerned calling from God, I believe it can become a truth. Our love of tradition is a blessing to us and you've heard me say I am not giving it up. But the purpose of it all is our growth in faith and action. As to the second quote, it counters a mental and emotional retrenchment I feel swirling among us – from COVID first of all, but also from the need to hold on to something in the midst of disappointment and confusion. Paul and Jesus both suggest this is the time to let go and watch for a miracle, to watch for God's power working among us.

As unexpected as this transition is, we will find gifts in it. New possibilities are already floating around as to where to cast our nets: our families want to see the park refreshed and what if we can find grants for that? Our Earth Care folks want to explore solar energy whether solar panels on our flat roof or joining a solar farm, a possible financial savings in the offing. I see our in history and practices the possibility of a Center for Theology, Music, and the Arts within HOH. In concert with other churches, neighbors, and, maybe actual concert makers like the SPCO, we can expand our part of an ecosystem of creativity and care for our neighborhood and city. And then there is the call to cultivate safe spaces for intergenerational community.

There is a difference between tradition and the past. Tradition is the doctrine and honored practices that have brought us into relationship with God; it has given us the faith in which we stand. Tradition is like a river's current carrying us toward God's preferred future. Transition or no, we are in that flow—to work against the current is exhausting—to go with it brings life and love without measure. We are a big House with big dreams – we are a people of great faith and great heart – and God is calling. We have so much to look forward to.

Grace and blessings to you, dear friends, and peace.  
Amen.